

WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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VERNON DAMANI JOHNSON OF WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION

INTERVIEWEE: VERNON DAMANI JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: SAUL GONZALEZ

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SAUL 00:00:12

Okay, so what is your name? Can you please spell out your first and last name?

VERNON 00:00:18

Vernon Damani Johnson. So V-E-R-N-O-N, D-A-M-A-N-I, Damani, and then Johnson, J-O-H-N-S-O-N.

SAUL 00:00:36

And how old are you? What is your birth date?

VERNON 00:00:41

4/17/1951. So I'm 73 years old.

SAUL 00:00:48

And what gender, if any, do you identify with? What are your pronouns?

VERNON 00:00:54

Male. He/him/his pronouns.

SAUL 00:01:01

And what race or ethnicity do you identify as?

VERNON 00:01:05

African American.

SAUL 00:01:09

Okay, so what was your life story prior to joining the Rainbow Coalition? Did you grow up in Washington state, or did you move here, and why?

VERNON 00:01:19

I grew up in the state of Ohio and lived there until I was twenty-five years old. I moved to Washington in 1977, but then I went to graduate school at Washington State University from 1977 until 1984, and in the meantime, I moved to Seattle. There's a story there, but I did not grow up in Washington. I moved here.

SAUL 00:01:54

Okay and then, were you involved in electoral politics prior to the Jesse Jackson campaign?

VERNON 00:02:03

No, I voted, but I was not otherwise active in electoral politics.

SAUL 00:02:15

All right, when did you join the Rainbow Coalition, and what was the Rainbow doing at the time that made you want to join?

VERNON 00:02:22

I guess I joined it--you know, of course, it grew out of, you know, a grassroots social movement style of politics. And so when you say join, that doesn't mean, like, dues paying member joined? Does that mean the moment when I started to engage in activism? Sometime in probably 1985 or six, when I--well, you know, there's two parts of the story. So I was a Jackson delegate to the Spokane County Democratic Convention in 1984 when I was living there before we moved to Seattle. And I was aware, I knew Jesse Jackson was running in the primaries, I went to my caucuses, and we had enough people to elect one Jackson delegate to the county convention. I was it.

And so I went to the Spokane County Convention, and, you know, there were numbers of people there who were interested in supporting who were Jackson delegates from the PSN caucuses, and I ended up rallying the Jackson people so we could maximize, you know, our numbers to get delegates to the state convention. So if that kind of mobilization on the spot is which you could call becoming a part of the Rainbow Coalition, then

that was it, and that would have been the spring of 1984. Now, I knew nothing, because the mass movement around the Rainbow in 1984 was all on the western side of the state, and I knew nothing about it. I became aware of the fact that it was going on, and I did not know any of those people then, but I was active in Spokane County politics as a Jackson delegate.

SAUL 00:04:44

And so what role or roles did you play in the Washington State Rainbow Coalition, and what were the organization's activities while you were involved?

VERNON 00:04:56

So, you know, of course, I met Larry Gossett when I moved to Seattle. The Rainbow people were among those who were protesting at the South African consulate in Seattle in 1985-6, you know, pushing for economic sanctions against South Africa. And they would rally there every Sunday afternoon. And we got wind of it, and me and my wife started to go. And at that time, we didn't know people, but you know, Larry was one of the people who was leading those demonstrations, getting arrested at the consulate for trespassing and all of that. And sometime along in there, I must have, when I recognized who he was, introduced myself to him, and also to people like Robby Stern, who was a labor organizer in King County and Washington state politics at the time. So I got to know those kinds of people in the period of 1985-86.

And your question was something about, so what activities did I undertake? What was that question again?

SAUL 00:06:22

Yeah, what was your role and the organization's activities?

VERNON 00:06:27

So then, when Jesse Jackson ran for president again in 1988, by that time, I was teaching at Western Washington University and living in Bellingham, and we were all, you know, waiting to see was Jesse going to run again, all of this kind of stuff. And, you know, if he was going to, I was going to be a supporter. And I knew Larry and all of these people. And so I actually invited Larry up to speak--and I taught political science at Western Washington University until 2021--to speak to one of my classes, and that evening, we organized a dinner meeting with some of my colleagues to introduce them to the Rainbow Coalition. And so that would have been 1987 or so.

And then when he ran the next year, there was nothing really organized, but there was all of this, you know, buzz and speculation about Jackson's second run. And one of my colleagues who had met Larry Gossett the previous year said, "Hey, you know, let's just organize a meeting for people interested in Jesse Jackson's campaign and see what happens." And that would have been because the caucuses were in March of 1988 we used to have like a Super Tuesday, and Washington was a Super Tuesday primary, because it was a caucus held the same day. And so this would have been very early, probably January of 1988 and we organized a meeting. It's hard for me to exactly recall, but you know, fifteen or twenty people or so showed up, and we knew that the caucuses were coming up pretty rapidly, so we started to meet weekly. And I would say that, you know, by the middle or toward the end of February, we had thirty, forty people showing up to the meetings and, you know, trying to, you know, because caucuses is very kind of complicated business, training people, like this is what's going to happen, and some strategies for how to handle your business and so forth. So that's what we were doing. So that would be over the winter months leading up to the caucuses in March of 1988, so now we're actively organizing as as Jackson campaign Rainbow Coalition activists.

SAUL 00:09:34

Awesome. How long were you involved in the Rainbow Coalition, then?

VERNON 00:09:41

Now that previous question also had to do with offices and all that. What?

SAUL 00:09:47

The previous question was, what role did you play and what were the organization's activities?

VERNON 00:09:53

Okay, so subsequently, I mean, we got half the delegates from Whatcom County to the Democratic convention. And if we had known how to play our strategies right, because actually, the majority of the people who showed up to caucus in Whatcom County that year were Jackson people, but you know, at the county level, there's all kinds of horse trading that happens, and our people weren't experienced. But anyway, we had half the delegates, and my wife and I were--Rebecca Johnson was whose name should also be mentioned, because we were both Jackson delegates to the Washington state convention. That year, and we went to Olympia for the convention, where the Jackson forces had 40% of the delegates. So we were a large contingent, and we demonstrated not in a, you know--I mean, we weren't trying to disrupt the meeting, but we demonstrated for about fifteen to twenty minutes in the halls that day to illustrate the importance of Jackson supporters to the Democrats' efforts that year.

So by that convention, which was in June of 2020 [sic], we were a movement in the state of Washington. And so I was on the advisory committee somewhere between, you know, by the caucuses and into the summer and so on. I was on the the advisory committee for the Jackson campaign in the state of Washington. So just, you know, an ad hoc thing that existed really through the convention. Of course, Jackson did end up supporting Michael Dukakis as the Democratic nominee that year, but, you know, he kept the movement going through the convention. So I was on the advisory committee, and then subsequently after that, was on the steering committee of the Washington State Rainbow Coalition for several years into the early 1990's, and then also, you know, was one of the founders, of course, of the Whatcom County Rainbow Coalition.

SAUL 00:12:15

Awesome. So how was the Washington State Rainbow Coalition structured? How were decisions made and new members recruited or chapters formed?

VERNON 00:12:24

Well, and you know, you'll get a better answer to that question from probably any number of other people that you might interview, because we did build a statewide organization and movement. I mean, we had people in, you know, Yakima County. We had people in Spokane, I can't--probably the Tri-Cities, I don't really remember, but we had a presence east of the [Cascade] mountains. And then we had people all up and down the I-5 corridor, from Vancouver to Bellingham and Whatcom County. But, you know, the fulcrum of the organization, was still centered around Seattle, King County.

And when you talk about things like how was it organized, and all that kind of stuff, Larry Gossett is the person who can answer those questions the best. What I will say is that we had a--I was on the steering committee which had people from all around the state, which met, I think quarterly, like four times a year. And I'm just trying to think what else to say about that. And then so, those local chapters which, would've had eight or ten or so, I would say, around the state, they all met regularly. And when we had our--I'm trying to remember how often we actually had statewide meetings--at those steering committee meetings, in which there would be fifteen to twenty or twenty-five people from all over the state, were moments when the local issues that were part of

the Rainbow agenda that were pertinent to those localized groups, they would tell you what kinds of issues they were working on and what they needed support on, and also looking for, you know, strategies and approaches to how to do the work.

And so, that's kind of, you know--it was loosely organized, and we did have--and again, you know, you talk to Larry Gossett and those kinds of people who actually really organized all this stuff--we had a founding convention of the Rainbow Coalition. Of course, it had been going on as a social movement since 1984, but that would have been in, I think, 1989 over the winter. I remember because there was like a foot of snow on the ground in Olympia, where the convention was held. There was quite a bit of snow, and it was like over President's Day weekend, so it was a three day weekend for a lot of people. So it was in Olympia. I remember all of those things very distinctly. And of course, it was a wholesale kind of a convention with workshops and stuff on the various dimensions and issues and stuff. I was a panelist in one of the workshops, I'd have to look back into my curriculum vitae to say exactly what we were talking about that day. But before the weekend was over, we elected officers, and so it became a much more formal nonprofit organization at that point. And of course, Larry Gossett was elected president.

And you know, again, I could rattle off the people who had the other offices and so forth, but you can get that information someplace else. But through all that time, I was a steering committee member.

SAUL 00:16:04

Awesome. Can you talk a little bit about what communities did the Rainbow organize in, and a little bit about the demographics of the coalition and how it approached race, gender, and sexuality impacting the Rainbows organizing?

VERNON 00:16:30

So that question has more than one part, so let's take them--so ask me the first question again.

SAUL 00:16:38

Yeah, so what communities did the Rainbow organize in?

VERNON 00:16:43

Well, so, you know, the Rainbow agenda was--Jesse had a very clever chant, and I didn't have time to look over the questions. "Black, white, yellow, brown, boom, boom, boom, the Rainbow's in town," something like that, you know. But the point is that we organized--when you looked, certainly statewide.

And one of the stories to tell, you know, I can tell my part of the story, and others will tell it, was that the Washington State Rainbow Coalition was the most organized branch or chapter of the Rainbow Coalition in the country. I think there's probably no question about that. It was in a stream of the kind of grassroots, progressive organizing that had been happening, particularly around Seattle, King County, since the 1960's. So people like Larry Gossett, who was, you know, associated with and now seems, you know, he was a former Black Panther; Roberto Maestas, who was a teacher at Franklin High School and a very strong Chicano Movement activist; and Bernie White Bear, who was the Native American activist when they created the Daybreak Star Center there in--what's the name of the park overlooking?--Discovery Park in Magnolia, which after they occupied it, it became a Native American Cultural Center; and Bob Santos, the great Filipino American organizer who was a mini term, I think he might have been on city council or a King County councilman; and then the white activists around the anti-war movement and the Students for a Democratic Society in this town. And Robbie Stern is somebody whose name I mentioned, and I didn't live here when all that happened. I've heard the stories told,

and there would be other names. But these people had been working together in coalition fashion since the 1960's on issues, right.

And because--and again, other people will say this--but you now know that I was a college professor, and so I taught and wrote about this stuff too, because you know, a lot of that civil rights politics, you know, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X in the Black side, Cesar Chavez and company in Chicano politics, and so on. It happened in places where there were larger concentrations of those racial ethnic groups, and you got to, like, the Pacific Northwest, and particularly with the work that they were doing around Seattle.

Now, the Black community in Seattle was never more than about 10% of the population. In those days, a city of about a half million people to, you know, forty, fifty thousand Black people, mostly in the Central Area and Rainier Valley. And Chicano, the Mexican American, Latino population was mostly east of the mountains, but there was a scattered community, you know, in King County and so forth, but not that many. Of course, a very significant Asian American community at that time, lesser known than, say, California, but for the Asian American community, one of the largest concentrations of the country of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Filipinos, to name just a few at that time. And of course, an influx of Vietnamese with the Vietnam conflict and so forth. A very diverse environment.

And so all those folks were doing coalition politics, but the point being that, in many parts of the country, even where Jesse Jackson came from, in Chicago, you know, South Side of Chicago was one of the largest Black communities in the country, right? It was easy for, you know, it was Jesse Jackson who was carrying forward the agenda of Martin Luther King and so forth coming out of the 1960's. And of course, he ended with the Poor People's Campaign, right? Which is already the beginnings of this kind of multiracialism, but very early. And a lot of that sentiment and that ethic to the work got cut off when King was assassinated, but Jesse Jackson picked that mantle up in the 1980's and I mean, he really meant it when he said it.

But, you know, in the South Side of Chicago and Harlem, and East Los Angeles on the one hand, and Watts and Compton on the other. You know, East Los Angeles, you know, brown, Latino; Watts, Black. You know, these people didn't have a long history of doing coalition politics with each other. So most of the Jackson campaign, most of the Jackson delegates around the country were Black. And then he had a lot of support in college towns, just like Bernie Sanders did these last couple of times. You know, liberal, progressive concentrations of all kinds of people in college towns and that sort of thing. But most of the delegates were Black. And then he had numbers of all races, but most of them were Black around the country. That wasn't true in Washington. It was a real Rainbow Coalition. I'm sorry I'm being long-winded about this, but that's why I say it was more deeply organized around the Rainbow idea and really an organization.

So one of the issues when you talk about electoral politics is that Jackson, the Rainbow Coalition, I think he would say that it was a social movement strategy and an electoral strategy, and running the presidential campaigns was a way to elevate the issues that, you know, our several communities cared about. But especially by the second time he had run, from the Jackson perspective nationally, from his perspective and the people around him, it was mostly about electoral politics.

And you can talk to other people, I mean, people like Larry Gossett and the late Charles Rolland, who's the name, it's too bad that he's not alive to take part in this, because the story of how the Black United Front in Seattle, which was very Afro-centered, I mean, very Black centered, you know, very Black nationalist. But you know, interesting they supported Jackson. Of course, how they came into the Rainbow Coalition--and I will say, I don't know how many of the buff people stayed with that--but Charles himself, I think, was transformed. Well, he was transformed to somebody who wasn't just thinking about the interests of Black people. And of course, he

became one of the successes. Charles eventually became the the chair of the Washington state Democratic Party, not just the Rainbow Coalition by, I guess it was the 1990's by the time that happened. I'm rambling a bit, but...

So the kind of issues we worked on, we worked on everybody's issues: farm workers issues; immigrant rights issues for both Latinos and Asians; civil rights, voting rights issues, which affects everybody, but you know, this comes out of the Black community. But you know, Latinos, everybody, organized labor issues and union issues, those kinds of things. Women's--we had a very strong plan for women's equality, you know.

I would say that there was space for LGBTQ organizing, and I don't want to misspeak now, because, you know, Jackson was a Baptist minister, and he came out of that kind of Black civil rights politics, and those communities split on LGBTQ rights then, certainly. But what I will say is LGBTQ people were welcome as a part of the work. And the only thing I'm questioning is whether or not informal documents when you're making your platform, writing your platform of exactly--I think that we had, we had a program, we would have called it gay and lesbian rights position at that time, which was intentioned for Jackson, with other parts of the Black civil rights community, in particular. I could go on and on. So we worked on everything in the local areas. Whatever issues were coming up, our local representatives would talk about those when we had our statewide meetings.

SAUL 00:26:49

Awesome. Yeah, so in this approach, the Rainbow approach to like multiracial communities and gay, lesbian, and women's rights and other things, how did that impact the Rainbow's organizing?

VERNON 00:27:07

Well, to the extent that, one, that we were successful at mobilizing around all those issues, that was then that furthered our ability to keep that Rainbow array of people at the table and in our meetings. And for several years, we were successful at that. So that's what I'll say. I don't know what else to add to that. I mean, the meetings were Rainbow grouping of folks. It wasn't mostly Black people. It probably was, you know, 30-35% Black, but not majority Black, and everybody else was at the table.

SAUL 00:28:08

So what were some of the coalition's achievements?

VERNON 00:28:14

Okay, the electoral machine that came together by 1988 to propel Jackson to, you know, as I say, like 40% of the delegates at the Washington state democratic convention, that electoral machine, which again, was statewide but particularly powerful in King and Pierce County. That machine, the same kind of leadership at the grassroots, the precinct level, the legislative district level and so forth in King County and Pierce County was responsible for getting Norm Rice elected as the first African American mayor of Seattle, whenever that was in the 1990's; was responsible for getting Larry Gossett elected to the King County Council, which was five terms, and of course, got defeated here finally, just a few years ago, but he had been in there at least twenty years, I want to say more than twenty, like maybe six terms, because they were four year terms. But that got Larry Gossett, again, former Black Panther, scary guy coming out of the 1960's and 70's, who, of course, had had a professional life as the director of the Central Area Motivation Program, CAMP, which I'm not sure still exists, at least not under that same rubric or title. But there was, basically, it was a community action agency, social service agency in the Central Area. I mean, he did that for, you know, more than a decade, and that's what he was doing when, when he got involved in the Jackson campaign. Anyway, but he then became a King County councilman. Rosa Franklin, African American from Tacoma, I think she was the first Black woman ever elected

to the state legislature, state senate. And during the same period, she served for, you know, fifteen or twenty years in the state senate. And a few other people, so it had real electoral clout.

And up here in Whatcom County, we had a very strong local chapter that met, you know, quarterly and we did election endorsements independent of the Democratic Party every cycle, and people who were of a liberal or progressive bend would seek our endorsement, as well as the Democratic Party's endorsement, and most of the time, we endorse the same people, but not always, because we were more progressive than the establishment of Democratic Party. But here in Whatcom County now I'm talking about, we became a political force such that people sought our support, alongside of or in addition to the Democratic Party. And we had a separate doorbelling, canvassing operation. So, you know, we would carry other Democrat stuff, but we would carry our own candidates that we endorsed, we would carry their literature and do our own canvassing. And that went on until the end of the 90's, it might have been the early 2000's, and that's, that's another question, I don't want to go off the cliff on that whole thing, but we did that here. The Whatcom County Rainbow Coalition survived longer than the Washington State Rainbow Coalition did, that's what I'll say. So those are just examples. And if you talk to people from other parts of the state, they can tell you, so that's the electoral politics.

And I want to add this, and other people will add it: that we decided to endorse the Chateau Ste. Michelle workers efforts to unionize the the Chateau Ste. Michelle wineries grape fields in the early 90's sometime, it was in the 90s, and that this had been a battle that had been going on for some years without the union having success. And you know, when you talk about being allies, and you know, we did have a labor component, but at one point we said, "Look, we--" I mean, you know, you're looking around for things that you can do that express the Rainbow idea. And some of us said, "Let's start supporting them in their efforts to unionize." And we did. We started to do information pickets at grocery stores that were carrying Chateau Ste. Michelle wines, to boycott them, you know. And you know, that went on for a year or two. I like to say that, of course, then we did a publicity campaign around it, you know, that got into the media and got into places that maybe through the union's own efforts they were not as easily able to reach. And you know, that sped up the process. And of course, unionization came more rapidly after that, I don't remember exactly what year it was, sometime in the mid 90's, you know. So that was a singular success.

SAUL 00:34:24

So what challenges, if any, did the Washington State Rainbow face?

VERNON 00:34:45

Well--and this is for the Harry Bridges Center, and so this is for--you want as full and accurate a portrayal of that history as possible. And I'll call it the way I see it. Other people will say what they want to say about it, and then when they see the video, they can come at me if they want to, and these will be people that I know in most cases.

When you say the challenges, I will say that Jesse Jackson, it's like, he let the genie out of the bottle. It's like, be careful what you ask for, you might get it. And like, in Washington, as I say, the Rainbow idea gave language to something people had been doing here for a generation or so already, and these people were now seasoned people. We were in our forties and fifties, and we'd been doing this stuff, in some cases, since we were in high school. I'm saying we, I wasn't living here then. I walked into it when I went to graduate school in Washington in the late 1970's. But, you know, people had been doing this kind of work, and we were interested in keeping the social movement going. And it was okay to--and the electoral politics part of it was significant, because it had successes. It had successes probably elsewhere around the country, because most of it was focused on electoral politics. But we wanted to build a social movement. There was a dynamic after a couple of those cycles of some people calling for the formation of a third party, but certainly a social movement.

And Jesse Jackson spent a lot of time in the state of Washington, in the 80's, from the mid 80's into the early 90's. But Jesse Jackson became more interested--he wasn't interested in trying to ride herd over the evolution of a social movement based on a Rainbow set of agendas in the whole fifty states. So in other words, a national movement. And of course, you know, we know how these things develop unevenly, and it wouldn't maybe be all fifty states. But maybe if you were trying to organize a social movement nationally, you might have fifteen or twenty states where you have significant chapters, you know, that kind of thing, and localities from place to place where you were. I would say the work that was being done in the state of Washington was being replicated, right? So that's a lot to manage as the leader of the movement. You know, I mean, Martin Luther King was doing something at least as big, although he was concentrated in the Southeast, but you can say that's what he was doing.

But anyway, Jesse though, you'll know from the history he ended up--he moved to Washington, DC. He became the shadow senator for the District of Columbia, which, as you know, does not elect its own representatives to Congress. This is like taxation without representation. It may not be a coincidence that it's a majority Black city today, majority Black and brown, because some Latinos have moved in the subsequent decades. But I mean, if you're familiar with George Clinton and the Parliament, they had an album called Chocolate City in the 1980's that expressed that idea about DC and some other urban places in the country. But he [Jackson] became the shadow senator for the District of Columbia. I mean, he was the non-voting representative, and he lived back there for a while. So he became enamored of the idea of maybe being an elected official someday, because DC statehood was always one of the platform goals within the Rainbow Coalition.

So he wasn't as interested in doing social movement organizing, and he would pass through here, because he had this very vibrant concentration of people who really believed in the Rainbow idea here in Washington. And so he would come through, and he was very helpful when people like Norm Rice were running for mayor. Because Norm, he's an African American who had been on Seattle City Council for a few terms, and he was liberal, but he wasn't really present when we were doing all that Jackson work in the 80's. And he would come out here and, you know, read Norm the [?riot act?], and say, "Norm, get your stuff together, man, we got to do this." And then we mobilized the Rainbow machine behind him. So he was around here. I'm getting long-winded.

So the challenge with Jackson wasn't all that interested in the social movement stuff, he became more interested in electoral politics. And then the other thing was that the Washington State Coalition took on a life of its own that was the most formidable in the country, I'm convinced. When we had that founding convention to really formalize it as an organization in 1989, and then what happened in the context of that, is that there was a split in the state coalition, because you had a group of people. So you had the Washington State Rainbow Coalition, and then you had the National Rainbow Coalition, it was, of course, headquartered in Chicago, and it was people with a direct relationship with Jesse Jackson and who were more on the electoral politics side of things.

And, you know, look, this is on the record. And for some reason or another, Roberto Maestas, and he's the one--then there was a Filipina, an Asian American woman, and I'm seeing her face, but I can't remember her name. I'd have to go back and look, maybe I have some records somewhere. And then people like Larry, and then one or two others that whenever we were at things, they would introduce themselves, as, you know, Representative the National Rainbow Coalition.

But as the weeks going toward that founding convention of the state coalition were coming down to the time of that convention, we had a historic meeting of the state coalition. And it was held here in Bellingham, because we used to move that meeting around from quarter to quarter, too. And I'll never forget it, because we organized

that meeting here. And you know, you had fifty or sixty people from all over the state representing their local Rainbow Coalitions. And the forces--and I would say, it was part the National Rainbow Coalition people, and also because Maestas was a major figure in Chicano politics statewide, and Maestas led the charge of saying he didn't want to see the statewide coalition formally organized. And I'll just say that, because he was against it, and he spoke against it in the meeting here at Bellingham. And the majority of us who wanted to have it won, but if there were sixty people, there probably twenty of them voted not to do it. So we had the majority, and we went forward.

But it was a split and Maestas when asked about why, is that he thought, you know, you had the presidency, you had a couple of vice presidencies, you had a couple of secretaries recording and the other works, the other secretary, you have the person who collects the mail, corresponding secretaries, treasurers. You know, you had an executive committee that was going to be seven or eight people. And, of course, in an organization like this, it's a rainbow, so everybody's gotta be represented, right? And Maestas said that he didn't feel like the Latino community in the state, which of course, was already the largest ethnic minority group in the state, it wasn't Black people, but it was just most of the folks lived east of the mountains in Yakima Valley, right? But there was more, quite more of them than there were Black people in the state. And rainbows, we described historically because of the way it comes out of the Black civil rights movement, and behind Jesse Jackson nationally was predominantly Black, not so much so here, but still the Black presence, right? But we had Native Americans, we had Asians.

And you know, the thing is, we feel like we would have worked it out. Man, you know, I mean Larry Gosset was going to be the president, right? Maestas, I don't see any reason. Maestas was--he wasn't Larry's--I think because he was older than Larry. He was a high school teacher at Franklin High School when Larry went to high school there. He supported them. Now, the Panther stuff came later, Larry was a college student at UW then. But they went back all the way like that, right?

And you know what, see, the funny thing is, you'll have to get the bottom from somebody else, the people who were intimately involved with that, because it was a function of Seattle politics too. Because, you know, if you ask Larry Gossett about it, when I asked him about it, you know, mum was the word, you know, he really wouldn't drop bottom line stuff. When you ask Bob Santos, those people about it, you know, you can't get anything out of them, I think because they felt like anything that they would have to say publicly would do more damage than had already been done. And I know that Larry and Roberto continued to collaborate on some things over the years, you know, but that was a very painful moment.

So you had that whole section of the Latino population that did not come into the coalition because of Maestas and company's position. And, of course, you know--what is it?--El Centro de la Raza. So that was Maestas organization, and it's still there today, very powerful. So, you see, they weren't in and that was very painful, but that didn't stop us from supporting the Chateau Ste. Michelle workers unionization several years later. See, so we remain faithful to the Rainbow idea. But that was a challenge, and that was very hurtful. And we had a presence for a number of years, but it could have been even more powerful and maybe enduring, had not that split taken place.

SAUL 00:44:12

Let me see the next question. What is your understanding of the Washington State Rainbow Coalition's mission, and did that coincide with the National Rainbow Coalition?

VERNON 00:47:19

You know, I think in interest of time, I mean, because how many questions in are we? Not very many, I don't think.

SAUL 00:47:28

There's about six more.

VERNON 00:47:30

So that means we've gone through like eight or nine?

SAUL 00:47:33

We've gone through ten or nine, yeah.

VERNON 00:47:33

Oh, we're not doing so badly, are we?

So--and I wish I had to taken some time to pull out some notes, because, I mean, Jackson had several mantras or slogans that nicely capture it. But I mean, and maybe I should pass on this question, and you can let somebody like Larry just answer it, but I mean, basically the mission was, I mean, in today's language, it's multiracial democracy. That's what we were already talking about then. And, you know, things like more equity and inclusion and all this language that is very prominent today was all the kinds of things that we were talking about then. And that's why we say, you know, the Rainbow Coalition and Jesse Jackson is a precursor to Bernie Sanders' stuff. And Bernie Sanders was a Jesse Jackson delegate in 1988, I think he was the mayor of Burlington, Vermont, at the time. But let somebody else answer that question.

SAUL 00:48:25

Okay. This is kind of related to the question, so you can also pass. But the Rainbow Coalition has a strategy of inside and outside. What did that mean to you? And what did you think of that strategy?

VERNON 00:49:04

Well, again, and that's the element. Electoral politics was inside the system, and then social movement politics, was started from the outside pressures of people in the system, and then it pressures the system by beginning to place people inside of it, but also just by pressure politics and saying, you know, getting people who are already in there to change their positions on the issues based on on the Rainbow agenda.

One of the things that got accomplished nationally with the Democratic Party was they started to--the share of delegates at the 1988 convention was the largest contingent of people of color ever at the Democratic Convention. 25% of them are Black, and overall, over 33%, over a third of the delegates overall were people of color. And that was 1988, that was unprecedented, even though Democratic Party had largely carried the civil rights agenda and led in passing voting rights and civil rights and all those kinds of things. It was still, you know, when you got to those echelons of power and representation, it was still largely white. That that changed, and count state parties started to have various kinds of, if you will, almost quota systems, that allowed for more POC representation as state party--I forget the name of the position, but a committee man, a Democratic Party Committee man or woman. Like the statewide party will have like fifty or sixty of these people, the Democratic Committee.

And of course, one of the things that happened is that in Democratic Party organizations, I think this is national now, they have to be 50% women. And the Rainbow was involved in that too, but was more concerned, I think, with the racial equity in terms of who actually was in the places and had votes inside the party as an

organization. And so the Rainbow was responsible for that. There were one or two other kinds of organizational things inside the Democratic Party, and again, if I had spent more time doing some homework I'd been able to spit those out, but hopefully somebody else will. So it had a real impact on the Democratic Party as an organization, in terms of diversifying it along racial lines, in particular.

SAUL 00:52:04

So the president at the time, Imogene Bowen, decided to resign in 1995. Can you talk a little bit about the events leading up to that, or the impact that that had on the organization?

VERNON 00:52:19

Imogene Bowen, I won't talk long on this, but she was a student of mine in political science at Western Washington University in the late 1980's. And so, of course, she was a long time Democratic Party activist in Skagit County and in state politics. I mean, she was [?dome?]. But, you know, she was a reserved indigenous woman, you know. And she was taking my classes because, you know, wow, you finally had a person of color that she could, like, relate to. But she was kind of, again, reserved, and, you know, she didn't play her entire hand. I mean, she obviously liked my classes. She would come to my office hours, we talked. And when we made the push to bring the Rainbow into other parts of the state, I had, like, coffee with her.

I didn't really know how active she was in the Democratic Party at the time, right? I subsequently learned, you know, but having said all of that, but you know, the impact of the Rainbow had started to wane by the mid 90's, and that breakup with the Latino community was part of it, although Chateau Ste. Michelle stuff had happened by that time. And you know, I was still involved very heavily with the Whatcom County Rainbow Coalition, and I became very heavily involved in the anti-government, or the anti-militia movement in this state, you know, against the white supremacist and anti-government militias, which the Rainbow, I think, because it was in a weakened state, then never became a prominent player in it. And we had cross burnings up here in Whatcom County. And you know, when I saw crosses starting to burn, I started showing up at those meetings, and I was trying to get the Rainbow people to get more involved in it, and some of them did, but mostly they didn't.

So, but all of that is to say this: I don't recollect. I would have paid attention to it at the time, but I don't recollect exactly what the reasons for Imogene stepping down were.

SAUL 00:54:56

Okay, and in your opinion, what led to the demise of the Washington State Rainbow Coalition?

VERNON 00:55:05

And of course, I've covered a lot of that terrain already. Maybe we can summarize. In my opinion, I mean, it became too focused on electoral politics. And even in Whatcom County here, the Chateau Ste. Michelle thing was the last really community organizing we did. And then it became almost like just a left-wing facsimile of what the Democratic Party was doing. Now again, it continued to be further to the left in the Democratic Party, and certain people would get the Rainbow endorsement. The Rainbow would endorse certain people and not endorse other mainstream Democrats in the same race. And so there'd be two Democrats running, and one gets the Rainbow endorsement, the other doesn't, that signals to progressive voters that this is really our person, and that was a useful thing. But we didn't seem to have any community organizing continuing to go on outside of electoral politics.

I think the lure of electoral politics is seductive. People just get stuck in it, and it can take up enough of your time as is. And then the work of doing social movement activism around issues, which then ultimately you still want to impact public policy and outputs of the state, but also social movement work can be geared toward--you

know, we talk about things like racial inequities and and certainly healthcare. So like the healthcare institutions, which you know, like some of them are public, some of them are private nationally; but also things like, of course, education systems are public entities, in that sense, governments in and of themselves. But there are other institutional areas that we could have continued to do social movement activism. So while you're waiting and hoping that the government's public policy is going to change, you can change policy in micro-areas of a variety of other, I would say public institutions, because they serve the public, but these are private organizations. They're nonprofit, non-governmental organizations. I think we got too mired in doing electoral politics, and of course, that kind of sapped some of the grassroots movement energy out of it.

SAUL 00:58:05

If you decided to leave the organization, why?

VERNON 00:58:14

Well, I was a dues paying member, my wife and I, in the Whatcom County Rainbow Coalition, until it closed down sometime. It was after the millennium. I'm trying to remember, because I was overseas. I was out of the country when they had that last meeting, and, you know, they had money and stuff, and here they were trying to figure out how to retire the organization and where to give the money. And I was not able to be there because I was out of the country, and usually that would be in the summertime, because I was a professor of political science, but also internationally African politics, and I was running back and forth to like Africa and stuff. But I was a dues paying member, me and my wife, till the very end in Whatcom County. The state coalition is now--just remind me so when Imogene resigned in '95, was at the end of the Washington State Coalition, pretty much?

SAUL 00:59:09

Yeah, something like that, yeah.

VERNON 00:59:10

Because I knew the one up here outlived the state one. And your question again was what now, again?

SAUL 00:59:20

Like if you decided to leave, why?

VERNON 00:59:22

Why did I decide to leave? Well, even with the statewide organization, we were with it until it ended. And then with the local one here in Whatcom County, we were with it and dues paying members until the day it closed down.

I'm still a believer in the Rainbow idea. I tell young Bernie Sanders activists, and I'm still an active researcher and analyst of contemporary affairs, and I write about left-wing populism and Bernie Sanders and AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] and the Squad, and all that kind of stuff. And I've already written stuff that, I mean, mostly it's about analyzing left populism and the tensions that it causes, the challenges that it causes to the mainstream Democratic Party. But part of that conversation is to talk about how left-wing populism is really pressing the multiracial agenda, right? So, I mean, I still believe in that. And we continue to move forward. I mean the Progressive Caucus inside of the House of Representatives, which is now about 40% of the Democrats in the House. This is all an outgrowth of the Rainbow Coalition. So I didn't leave the coalition, the coalition left the field as an active organization in American politics.

SAUL 00:59:32

And my last question is, what lessons did you learn in the Rainbow Coalition that can be valuable for today?

VERNON 01:01:23

I want to say something that's snappy, you know? I mean, there was that TV show on KCTS Public TV in Seattle for many years, it may still come on, called, Celebrate the Differences. And there's a Chinese--the Book of Changes that I read, the I Ching and so forth. It talks about joy and movement and working together along those lines. But I just think that having taken the next step, you know, the multiracial organizing in this country, first of all, has always happened. And I'm not actually a historian, although to teach political science, you gotta know some history. And really, you know, I always tell people, I mean, this may shock you, but I'm not really an American politics guy. I'm an international relations and comparative government, you know, with the focus on the Global South. That's what I was trained to do, and that's mostly what I taught in my career.

So there are other people who know the details of that history, but multiracial organization has always gone on. And it went on, you know, before the Civil Rights Movement, mostly places like the labor movement, the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] movement, during the Great Depression. The Civil Rights Movement from the mid 50's until the mid 60's was on an unprecedented level of it, because many white people, of course, began to join in those nonviolent marches and so forth. Even after we called for Black Power and after people called for Chicano power, there were whites for grape boycotts, lettuce boycotts. You know, white folks were holding their purse strings to make those boycotts work, right?

So, I think that the Rainbow was another step in the evolution of that multiracial organizing. And I mean, that work for me, started in the 1980's, and I had lunch with Larry Gossett and Robby Stern over the holidays. I drove down to Seattle and met up with them, you know. And I'm still, you know, I'm connected with people. I mean, Robby's doing this Puget Sound Association of retired people [sic, Puget Sound Advocates for Retirement Action], which is the left wing AARP. And they're not just dealing with, you know, retirees issues. I mean, they're getting ready to have a big forum around Juneteenth, because Larry Gossett is also involved in that. See, so people will continue to organize and network, they can call on each other, and we can support young people.

I mean, Cindy Domingo, you know, I actually--I didn't know her. I was teaching part time in UW, and she was one of the leaders in the South African divestment movement. She was a student government officer, and so she was in the papers. I said, "Who is this young Filipina?" But then, you know, a couple years later, I met her doing community organizing. And I taught a course about civil rights in the state of Washington, up until just before the pandemic, you know, we're in Bellingham, we take a field trip to Seattle, go to the Wing Luke Museum, go to the African American Museum. Well, you know, Cindy Domingo, I called her up, she came down and had lunch with our students in the ID [International District], you know. And so, you know, the networks continue, and we're able—

Another point I want to, because I'm looking at you, you're a student right now, aren't you? What's your major?

SAUL 01:05:25

I'm studying history.

VERNON 01:05:27

At UW? And you're a Bridges Institute [sic] intern?

SAUL 01:05:32

Yes.

VERNON 01:05:34

Well, I mean, I wouldn't be surprised that I'm looking at somebody who's already done some activism and organizing, and you know, see what I'm saying? We gave our students opportunities, you know, to get in the mix. I know you guys want to, you know, chart your own course, but you know, there are those of us who've been there before and who already have connections to some places you might not have them. But all of that was able to be unleashed by the connections this unprecedented network of people, and to some extent, all over the country. And you know, a lot of them, I'm sure, in Bernie Sanders circles, and people showing up at their caucuses, and people don't caucus so much anymore, but people organizing for the Sanders campaigns in locales around the country, they'll say, "Well, you know, I was a Jesse Jackson delegate back in the day." So this building of the multiracial left in this country, you know, was much enhanced and fostered by what the Rainbow Coalition did then. I say, we're all children of Jesse Jackson. We're all children of the Rainbow, including you.

SAUL 01:07:07

Awesome. Is there any last thing that you wanted to talk about in this interview that you didn't get the chance to before we wrap up?

VERNON 01:07:13

I'll probably get off and think of, "Oh, I wish I had said that." But this was good, and some of those details that had to do with some of those earlier questions, you know, other people, because I can say the organization was always centered around people in Seattle who were in more intimate contact.

You know, I used to take my students to El Centro de la Raza, so I had a relationship with Roberto Maestas and Estela Ortega. I used to take them to the Central Area Motivation Program. So, you know, I always had a contact with Larry. And then when he was on King County Council, I took my classes down there. But, you know, sometimes I would go a year or two without talking to those guys, but you knew you could always tap into them. But they were always talking to each other. And so some of the exact times and dates when this happened, or what the particular kinds of procedures or rules were, they knew, because part of it is I didn't have to be involved in all that, because they knew where to find me, also, when they needed me for something.

But I don't have anything in particular to add at this time, but I do appreciate that people thought of me, because you know, I played my part in that work, and also, hopefully people would think to the work that's going on to this day.

SAUL 01:08:37

All right, well, I'm going to stop recording now.